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ABSTRACT

The nature of the interactions that occur among peer leaders, peer influence, and the dynamics of the peer reference group in the context of health, interpersonal relations and lifestyle choice were the subjects of this study. Its first stage (of two) employed a case study of a single metropolitan senior high school in Australia. Adolescent peer groups at Grade 10 (14- and 15-year-olds) were the subject of intensive study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a limited amount of non-participant observation. Transcribed interviews and other documents were subjected to analysis using open coding (i.e., coding for as many categories or abstractions of the phenomena under consideration, observed in the data, that might fit the data) and memo writing. A taxonomic representation of the nodes resulting from the fracturing and indexing of the data appears as Appendix One. Preliminary findings from Stage One of this study as discussed, as well as theoretical frameworks which may- or may not be useful in the analysis and interpretation of those findings. The paper asserts that adolescent frames, values-sets and language are needed in order to gain access to the adolescent subculture, and from this perspective to reveal the world viewed within the social realities that adolescents confront on a daily basis. Contains 36 references. (TS)

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RETHINKING ADOLESCENT RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOUR AND THE PEER LEADER DYNAMIC

by

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Re-thinking adolescent risk-taking behaviour and the peer leader dynamic

Adolescence has been defined as the stage of development between childhood and adulthood which is characterised by individual effort towards the achievement of societal and cultural goals. This stage includes acquiring independence, a sexual identity, a recognition of 'self', and a place in society. Those behaviours that challenge adult norms and community standards may, however, represent deep seated challenges to authority and are regarded by adolescents as necessary in order to achieve self determination. Such deviant behaviour will expose them to risk through curiosity and/or experimentation (Bennett, 1984) and the single most influential element in their daily life under these circumstances is likely to be the peer group (Vadies, 1984). The peer group, according to Gay (1992), " ... is the halfway house between the family and the adult world, and is one of the most powerful and potent forces effecting change in the adolescent" (p. 207). While social reciprocity is an important aspect contributing to peer group cohesion and a sense of belonging, not much is known about the dynamics of adolescent peer group influence as constructed by members of the peer group themselves.

Peer pressure (or influence) has been defined by Newman (1984) as, "Pressure to appear independent, pressure for recognition, pressure to appear mature or grown-up, and pressure to have fun" (p.146). The influence of the peer group has been shown to be crucial in influencing virtually all areas of the adolescent's life including that of health behaviour. Peer pressure has long been recognised as a significant factor in the lifestyle choices, particularly those associated with risk-taking. School health programs have in recent times been developed which not only incorporate knowledge and attitudes towards areas such as sexuality and drug use, but also address the developmental, emotional, psychological and social dimensions (Scales, 1983), including examining the role of the peer group, associated with making lifestyle choices. Kirby (1985) in relation to learning outcomes for sexuality education, stated that sex educators now recognised that their students were influenced by life outside of the school grounds, including the peer group. As a result, sex educators were now assuming responsibility for evaluating the influence of their programs on their students' lives outside of the classroom.

A search of the relevant literature revealed many studies which focused on the influence of the adolescent peer group in assisting or facilitating the adoption of health behaviour. There appears, however, to be a paucity of studies focusing on the identification of adolescent peer opinion leaders and their role in influencing others, or in the nature of

the interaction of peer leaders within the overall dynamics of the peer group which contribute to our understanding of the phenomena involved.

Results from a study undertaken by Lau, Quadrel and Hartman (1990) showed that modelling of a behaviour within the peer group was, "... the strongest socialization technique in developing healthy lifestyles" (p.257). Initiation into marijuana use by adolescents, for example, was found to be influenced far more strongly by the peer group (48%) as compared to parental influence (14%) (Kandel, 1982), and once the use of marijuana began, the major social influence contributing to its continued use was the imitation of peers (Kandel, 1985). What type of influence or modelling by peers was singularly influential in affecting the uptake and continuing use of drugs was not examined and needs to be explored further. A study by Tolone and Tieman (1990) identified and categorised adolescents into 'loners' and 'socials'. These researchers found that the 'loners' were subjected to less peer pressure and influence than was usual with other peers and correspondingly exhibited less delinquency and drug use than did the 'socials'. Increased drug use by adolescents was found by Halebsky (1987) to correlate with the effects of peer (and parent) drug use, while Simons and Robertson (1989) found that the influence of deviant peers, combined with low self-esteem, was an important correlate affecting adolescent use and misuse of drugs.

Adolescents, 13-18 years of age, have been identified by Greig and Raphael (1989) as a population whose frame of reference does not include sickness or disease. A disease prevention focus must, if it is to be effective, identify and address the issues, concerns and motives for sexual and drug-use behaviour that are important to the adolescent population. In their discussion on HIV/AIDS prevention and adolescents, Greig and Raphael also report that, "When a realistic acknowledgement of adolescent behaviour has been maintained in the design of educational programs, substantial and significant reductions in unintended pregnancies have been reported" (p.213). Rosenstock, Strecher and Becker (1988) advocate that models, such as that of the health belief model, should incorporate the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) in order to affect the acquisition or modification of complex lifestyle practices. The inclusion of self-efficacy, they believe, will provide a "more powerful approach to understanding and influencing health-related behaviour than has been available to date" (p.182). In particular, an area that needs to be addressed is that of the perceived control adolescents believe they have in given social situations which might involve risk-taking behaviours, such as injecting drug use or unprotected sexual activity.

The application of the concept of self-efficacy to the control of risk situations associated with possible HIV infection was proposed by Bandura in 1990, when he stated that

"translating health knowledge into effective self-protection action against AIDS infection requires social skills and a sense of personal power to exercise control over sexual situations" (p10). Studies carried out in looking at self-efficacy in areas of preventive and rehabilitative health behaviour, such as smoking (Di Clemente, Prochaska and Gilbertini, 1985) and alcohol and heroin use (Marlatt and Gordon, 1985) have shown that self-efficacy was the single most important measure. "A strong sense of efficacy for behaving in a health fashion is central to self-regulation of one's life" (Schunk and Carbonari, quoted in Lawrence and McLeroy, 1986, p.320).

The majority of these studies have been conducted using an adult population. However, generally, adolescents do not see themselves to be 'at risk' (Chapman and Hodgson, 1988; Greig and Raphael, 1989), and this has immediate implications for those who are most vulnerable through their active participation in risk taking situations such as drug use and sexual behaviour. Those who are particularly at risk frequently exhibited poor social skills for resisting peer pressure and for negotiating the adoption of protective behaviour (Dryfoos, 1985), implying low self-efficacy.

A method which has been used effectively, particularly in smoking prevention, is that of peer-led programs. Using this approach, students were taught how to 'inoculate' themselves against social pressures by specially trained older peers. This was effected through the use of social modelling techniques, rehearsal of resistive behaviours and focused feedback methods.

Peer-led school-based programs using this method have resulted in a 40%-70% reduction in smoking onset (Flay, 1985; Telch, Killen, McAllister, Perry and Maccoby, 1982), and these reductions have been maintained for up to five years (Telch et al, 1982). A project implemented by St. Pierre, Shute and Jaycox (1983) not only enrolled peer leaders to become teachers but also used them as counsellors in stop-smoking clinics. The involvement of peer leaders as counsellors was introduced to overcome what was regarded as lack of effective peer support, peer teaching and positive peer influence in assisting youth acquire more healthy behaviours (p.28), and was seen by the researchers to be a positive addition to the program. The inclusion of training in the areas of assertiveness, anxiety and stress management (Botvin, 1986) has also proved to be valuable in contributing to the success of peer-led programs. This finding is also confirmed by Carter (1993).

The group of studies reviewed above serves to illustrate the importance of the peer group in influencing the adoption of health behaviours - or the converse. Many of the programs where peer leaders were used, were conducted in school within a formal

organisational structure, or otherwise enlisted into the program motivated students who wished to change their 'at-risk' behaviour.

Prior research

As part of their conventional wisdom, researchers, teachers and health workers have generally accepted as a given the power of the adolescent peer group, and especially peer leaders, in influencing adolescent behaviour. Most of what has been written about adolescent peer groups, however, is drawn from adult perspectives rather than the viewpoints of the adolescents themselves, concerning how individuals construct meaning and make sense of the group life they share with their peers. These perspectives are extremely important in trying to understand adolescent risk taking behaviour especially in the area of sexuality and drug use, where teenagers form a major sub-population of the 'at-risk' target group yet are still amenable to curricular and other school influences.

For the past five years, we have undertaken research and evaluation concerning adolescent peer leadership and associated interventions in health education settings in high schools. The results of these quantitatively based studies, guided and informed primarily by Social Learning Theory and Peer Cluster Theory have been reported elsewhere (Carter and Carter, 1993, Carter, 1994, Carter and Carter, 1995). Findings from this work showed that eight variables of Relationships, Communication, Responsibility, Love, Choices, Sexuality, Trust and Risk are extremely important to adolescents and youth. Further, that there are gender differences in the ways that these are perceived and responded to by boys and girls. It was also discovered that with students' exposure to a sustained health/human relations and sex education program, from initial differences, there was a convergence in understandings and attitudes, on the variables mentioned above, across both sexes. Finally, in interventions where adolescent peer leaders can be identified and equipped with authentic health knowledge, social and interpersonal skills and their self-efficacy improved and sustained, there is a multiplier effect back into the school community through the peer reference group (Carter, 1993). This finding, in particular, has implications for the curriculum, pastoral care and teaching learning strategies such as co-operative learning and cross-age tutoring.

As our research findings accumulated, it was apparent that our understanding of the nature of peer group leadership, as constructed by adolescents themselves, and the dynamics in operation between patterned peer group influences and individuals within the reference group(s) was very limited. This was especially so with respect to adolescent risk taking behaviour in the areas of sexuality and drug use. In particular we

do not understand very much about what occurs between peer leaders and the way they influence their peers, and in turn how the peer group influences and shapes individuals in the context of adolescent risk taking and lifestyle choice. This dynamic is the focus for an intensive two stage study, in a naturalistic inquiry paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), using qualitative methods drawn from ethnography.

Specifically, the study seeks to understand the nature of the interactions that occur between peer leaders[1], peer influence, and the dynamics of the peer reference group in the context of health, interpersonal relations and lifestyle choice. Data were collected from a single case study school in 1995, and the design has been widened in 1996 to incorporate three more schools, including a rural high school. Only stage one data are reported here.

The Setting

Cranmer College is an Anglican foundation located in a middle class suburb in the outer metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia. It is located in a 'native garden' setting with clustered single story limestone coloured buildings capped by red tiled roof lines. Modern classrooms and special purpose rooms, such as laboratories and workshops, are grouped according to subject area and function and linked via 'walkways' which are similarly roofed to give some protection from the sun and rain. The Administration building, Library Resources Centre and Performing Arts complex stand slightly apart from, and contrast with, the contemporary architectural style and hexagon shape of the School Chapel which is a highly visible and significant feature within the overall school complex.

A self contained feeder primary (i.e.. elementary) school within the College campus stands on the same site and allows for the operation of a vertically sequenced K-12 Curriculum. Just over 800 students attend this co-educational College in which a wide range of programs and extra curricular activities are offered and promoted. Sporting activities, and outdoor excursions and camps for retreats and outdoor challenge, play a large part in the life of the school. The wearing of school uniforms by students is compulsory and codes are strictly adhered to.

A significant proportion of the school population is of Asian origin, reflecting recent demographic changes in the larger Australian population, although this demographic shift in the school population is not yet registered in the social atlas of Perth (Australian

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[1] A peer leader has been defined as, "... an individual who has, and exercises, an ability to influence others, negatively or positively, irrespective of adult norms or wishes" (Carter, 1994; p. 26)

Bureau of Statistics, 1993) The student body is organised around a 'house system' - a derivative of the English Public and Grammar School tradition which tends to be pervasive in Australia stemming from its colonial roots. Various icons, trophies and pictures in school publications also attest to this tradition. The locus for pastoral care, hobbies and sports emanates from the various 'houses'. A Peer Leader Support Program has been instituted for which Grade 10 students volunteer and undergo a selection and training process at the end of each academic year. In the year following, as Grade 11 students (aged 15 -16 years), they undertake responsibilities to assist incoming Grade Eight students (aged 12 - 13 years) make the transition from primary (elementary) to secondary education.

School ethos promotes both individualism and teamwork, under the broader rubric of excellence stemming from personal effort in academic, sporting and cultural fields, including community service. A sense of well regulated order and self discipline is inculcated in staff and students which extends to, and is seemingly well received, by the parent group which supports the College's values and ethos. The result is that the life of students at Cranmer is well regulated, busy, closely supervised and tightly circumscribed.

Gaining access to the Grade 10 student cohort, once access to the school was obtained and entry protocols completed, was via their classes in 'Personal Development', since this articulated with and superseded the Health Education program offered in Grades Eight and Nine. Fieldwork subsequently extended into other areas of the formal curriculum as well as extra curricular activities on and off campus.

Methods

The initial stage of the investigation has employed a case study of a single metropolitan senior high school. Adolescent peer groups at Grade 10 (14 and 15 year olds), on and off campus, were the subject of intensive study. Data were collected using intensive semi-structured interviews, document analysis and a limited amount of non-participant observation. The focus for these activities was on what the students themselves understood, and how they constructed meaning regarding the nature and functioning of their peer groups; peer group influence(s), and, where it was referred to in the first instance by the students themselves, peer group leadership. Data analysis has been effected using the NUD.IST text analysis package (Richards and Richards; 1991, 1994) and the specific steps in the investigation during stage one are set out below. Prior to engaging in fieldwork, researchers' personal values and preconceptions were circumscribed by means of self-interview and diary entries. Initially, peer groups in the case study school were mapped using sociometric techniques and triangulated for

authenticity against teacher/administrator knowledge and unstructured observation. Peer leaders (see footnote 1) were identified using the students themselves in the first instance. Students provided information from a short questionnaire in which the key indicator question asked whom they thought among their peers influenced their behaviours the most. This information was sorted by computer and the most frequently named students were identified. The names of that emerged from the computer sort were subsequently examined by a reference group of teachers and administrators who, by consensus, confirmed or otherwise helped to identify those students they considered to be peer leaders. The names of those students nominating 'influentials' were also recovered and became candidates for possible peer groups.

Intensive interviewing of teaching and administrative staff, including the school Principal, two Deputy Principals, School Psychologist, and selected Grade Ten teachers, some of whom had pastoral responsibilities for the cohort, was undertaken. This was in order to provide the researchers with some understanding of the ethos of the school, it's organisation and *modus operandi* and the aspirations the school held for its community and in particular the Grade 10 students. These data were supplemented by the analysis of documents, including staff handbooks, student homework diaries and memos and minutes to staff, students and parents/guardians.

Students, identified as being influential by their peers, were then interviewed singly and/or in pairs, and subsequently with members of their reference groups. A mapping exercise was also undertaken with students, since they tended to define their groups in terms of 'territory' held on campus, rather than in structural terms.

Interviews, after transcription, and documents were subjected to analysis using open coding (ie coding for as many categories or abstractions of the phenomena under consideration, observed in the data, that might fit the data) and memo writing. A taxonomic representation of the nodes resulting from the fracturing and indexing of data appears as Appendix One.

Theoretical explanations of the dynamics of the adolescent peer group have been developed from the categories that emerged in the first stage of the Project and those reported in this paper will form the basis of a typology of peer leadership 'styles' being considered as the research progresses in Phase Two of this Project.

Analysis and Discussion

Preliminary Findings: Stage One

The data gathered so far is extensive and calls for analysis at a number of levels. This section does not attempt to report on all the findings. Rather, it gives only a glimpse into some of the general directions in which the data is going and focuses more specifically on one aspect of the data - on peer influence. In doing so, it also illustrates one of the dilemmas and challenges in this sort of qualitative research, that 'things often aren't what they seem to be' or more precisely, that they often aren't what the informants might tell you in the first instance.

At the outset, this study with Grade 10 students, avoided making assumptions about peer groups and peer leadership and about who influences whom and the nature of influencing behaviour. The first interviews with individual students, which were very generally about how they made decisions and how the decision may have been influenced, used the strategy of recalling critical incidents to focus students' thinking on who influenced them and how.

One incident students were asked to recall was a recent controversial class discussion; another was a difficult personal decision they had had to make. In both cases, students were encouraged to think through the story of the discussion or the critical decision, how they might have been influenced, by whom and how they made their decisions.

As indicated earlier, in a separate exercise, also at the start of the inquiry, students were asked to nominate those students they most admired; students who they felt influenced them most; students whose support and advice they sought and students with whom they shared their dreams. At the end of this exercise they were asked to describe in more general terms the characteristics of those students they thought were most influential.

Peer Influence

Most students had no problem identifying peers they admired and who influenced them. They also had no trouble nominating the attributes of influential students. Almost fifty [50] categories of attributes were listed. Those which were most frequently mentioned [i.e., by more than twenty students] are set out in Table 1.

Table 1 Most frequently mentioned characteristics of students who influence

... sharing of interest and activities [36 mentions]
... having a sense of humour/fun [31 mentions]
... being a close friend [30 mentions]
... loyalty and trust [25 mentions]
... being a good listener [23 mentions]
... achieving academically [22 mentions]
... being kind/friendly [22 mentions]

These categories have been collapsed around common responses and only reflect the few highest-ranking attributes. The categories reflect closely the ideas of the informants. In some instances, the responses given by the students were simply lists of attributes, as in the following example:

Good morals,
Mature,
Funny, Willing to listen, and
Good at computing. (NL)

In other instances, the responses reflected a more sophisticated appraisal of why certain individuals were influential. As indicated in the following examples, even though the exercise required them only to nominate individual characteristics, some students talked about an influencing relationship and the mutuality of influencing behaviour. For example:

We have mutual respect for each other but our differences help us to interact to balance stuff out, and we have trust in each other. (DC)

... My friends have not been chosen for what they do, but rather for what they think and how they act. A lot of my friends have slight social problems and I think I am friends with them partly because of this. {....} has a tendency towards aggressive behaviour and can get upset easily. I think that my ability to counteract both his attitudes to others and their attitudes to him is what has kept him my friend. (JM)

Peer Groups and Security Blankets

During these initial probing exercises which began the process of finding out about patterns of influencing behaviour, talk soon turned to the influence of close friends and peer groups with whom interviewees associated.

Preliminary findings suggest that peer or friendship groups are a very important feature of school social organisation for the students in this study. Groups vary in size and degree of cohesion from very small, close knit, long-standing groups through to large, loose 'gatherings' of individuals forming fairly fluid groups. Groups have particular locations where they meet and which are recognisable by others. Students were readily able to map where various groups could be found, and some even claimed that at any time of the day they could find an individual by going to that group's usual meeting place.

It would not be putting the point too strongly to suggest, that for the majority of the students in this study, peer groups are an essential aspect of school life. Groups play an important social and socialising role; provide emotional support, and, depending on their size, a place where individuals feel safe to talk about very intimate and personal dilemmas.

On the whole, these students were well aware of the importance of group life for them, as indicated by the following comment:

> *Even though we are all individuals, without the group it wouldn't be, as I wouldn't enjoy coming to school I wouldn't think of coming to school as something if I couldn't see my friends. Its a sort of security blanket. It's there all the time. (14895b..AS..SFG..Int..G)*

Often, these students were very articulate and reflective about groups, especially their own, but also about others and about groups generally in a more academic sense. Many had a sophisticated, yet practical, understanding of the dynamics of peer groups at school and, as in the following example, consciously worked to celebrate and maintain group life.

> *We talk about it a lot, even when we went out the other night to Miss Maude's [a cafe in Perth] we talked about our group for an hour and a half and people walked past. ... {....} and {....} said that they were happy that they had friends that they could talk to about this kind of stuff. { }is*

going through problems with her Mum and Dad at the moment and we'll help her through that.

It's like the beginning of this year {....} wrote me a file about our friendship. That's the thing with our group, we are very like, we are all are really lucky to have friends like we have. We don't mind recognising that fact. Like sentimental value, I have memorised {....'s} file that she made me. (14895b..AS..SFG..Int..G)

The data so far is indicating some complex and contradictory ways in which influence might be exerted on individuals through peer groups. Apart from differences in the size and stability and location of groups, individuals come together around many different sorts of activities. In most cases it was commonality of activity or interest that brought people together. Boys tended to be involved in physical activity, in sport or in computer games. For all groups, but especially for the girls, group activity at school involved *hanging around;* often referred to in terms of 'hanging around' with someone or 'hanging around' a location. The 'hanging around' also inevitably involved *talking;* often referred to in terms of 'talking' to someone or 'talking' about something.

Yeah. I think the boys play chasey and run around. The girls will sit and think about things. They are always talking and always aware of who they are going to talk to and everything. The boys, the popular boys just sort of talk to anyone - they don't really ... (21896..AS..SMG..Int..G)

Girls' pre-occupation with talking as something they did in their group rather than some sort of physical exertion was variously viewed either positively or negatively. At times (and usually by the boys) it was seen in negative terms as an idle, unproductive activity and as *'just sitting around and talking'*. At other times, it was viewed positively (usually by the girls themselves) as an activity which enabled them to reflect and resolve differences and personal difficulties. In the following discussion, for example, a group of girls was reflecting that they felt another group was too big for effective talk.

... but there is a big group of girls there that is really big and because it is so big - they - I wouldn't think they have the chance to talk to each other, and be able to be close friends. Whereas we just sit in a group and like, everyone listens to everyone and we - it's just so fun. (14985..AS..SFG..Int..G)

'We're Not Sheep'

When it comes to looking at how influential groups are on the behaviour of individuals, the data are currently presenting a somewhat confusing picture. Apart from the exercise in which students were asked to nominate influential peers, a clear message coming through the data suggests that many students did not see themselves as being strongly influenced by their peers. Groups and close friends were obviously seen as sounding boards and places where you can go for support and advice, and, when asked to nominate the characteristics of influential peers, the ability to listen and be empathetic were important. However, on the whole, students did not see themselves as being unduly influenced by others. As suggested by one student:

> *I don't think they do influence me. I think they ... just like to discuss things with each other. With my friends we don't all dress the same, talk about the same things. We all belong to different clubs outside the school and have completely different interests. (SK)*

This not appearing to be vulnerable to the influence of others was matched in numerous situations by students describing how in a disagreement or discussion or when facing a personal dilemma, students weighed up the situation and quite rationally made up their own minds. In commenting on a controversial class discussion, one male student singled out a female student as being influential on his thinking. The issue that was being discussed focused on a mother who discovered she was carrying a baby with a disability. In describing the influential student and the impact on his thinking, the informant indicated:

> *She's a smart girl. She's down to earth. What she usually says is passionate but it's usually reasonable. Previously I'd thought abortion would be the way to go, because I personally wouldn't want that child, but I thought that it would be reasonable to keep it.*

However, he then went on to say that the same person did not always sway his thinking and that:

> *I always listen to her but she's not a major influence. At the end I was still undecided, but she opened my views up to that side. (RW)*

These students appeared to see self-reliance and independent thinking as being desirable. Many comments were made which suggest they had been socialised to value thinking for themselves and not being unduly influenced by others. The valuing of being themselves,

of not imposing their views on their peers and of not being 'led' by others was a recurrent theme. One student, describing his group, said of it:

> *... well we don't really want to be like them, because we're not sheep, we don't follow one certain trend, we're individuals all of us and we go with the company of other individuals. ... That's basically what we all are, we are our own people and most of us are probably a lot more grown up than some of the others. (21895a..AS..SMG..Int..G)*

Apart from promoting his group as being 'our own people', it is interesting to note the reference to other groups and other individuals in pejorative terms with the inference that they are less mature and more likely to follow like sheep. This was not an uncommon tendency. Informants' own groups were often portrayed as being different from others in a positive sense. Though groups appeared to get quite harmoniously at school, there were undercurrents of gentle rivalry and denigrating aspects of other groups that were different or unknown.

This socialisation towards independence and resisting undue influence by others needs further exploration. In part it could be linked to the school curriculum and to promotion by the school of independence and self-reliance. In part, it is also likely to be linked to parental values and to parental concerns about adolescents 'being led astray' by their peers. Whatever the reasons and however real or not it may be in practice, in word at least, the attitudes of these students requires on the strength of peer influence to be viewed cautiously.

'*Going with the Crowd*'

This is not to say that the data did not show the presence of peer group influence. Whether it was simply not recognised or whether it was being denied, there was sufficient information in the data to suggest that much of what happened in and across groups amounted to very influencing pressures. As indicated in the following comments, even the most independent thinker is pressured:

> *Yeah I think that people are influenced by other people but it depends. Say if you're the only person in the class who is talking about a different side, then obviously you have to change because people, everyone else is saying things at you, but I mean you must change a little bit, because you think, well if everyone else thinks this then maybe there is something wrong with what I'm thinking but you often still keep what you thought inside but you say something a bit different just to fit in. (2895d..AS..SF..Int..Inf)*

In another situation, a student described a class discussion where the topic was argued strongly and from different perspectives and eventually appeared to have been resolved with some unanimity. However the pressure to reach agreement might have been deceptive, because, according to the informant:

> *... they might have just said it to look like they were with the crowd, but everyone thinks what they think. But whether they say what they think, or they just go with the crowd - inside they still have their own opinion and that's preconceived. You can't change someone's opinion like that, I don't think. You might say ... for outward appearances, but inside you still think the same thing. (3795..AS..SM..Int..Inf)*

The Mainstream

Much of the evidence that students were influenced by peer pressure came not so much from direct talk about being influenced by others as in the more subtle messages coming through the data.

As was indicated earlier, in the discussions with the students about groups, the perception they had of their own group often differed from their perceptions of other groups. One aspect of that was the notion that there was a *'main'* or *'core'* group and that their own group was, in a sense, peripheral to this group. The description of the main group was fairly consistent. It was a large, almost amorphous collection of *"the main people who hang around the canteen"* and were referred to as the *'canteen group'*. It appeared to be the group one should be seen to be mingling with if one wanted to be considered part of the *'mainstream'*. The following lengthy extract from a group discussion is indicative of how the canteen group was perceived by those outside it.

> *... you sort of have one really big group which is the so called popular group where everybody hates each other and bitches about each other all the time. Like being, they think they are all popular but they all hate each other. Do you know what I mean?*
>
> *Yeah, I understood that.*
>
> *And it is sort of like, what's the point of them being popular people it is just bitch thing. It's like, you always hear them bitching each other all the time, their so called best friends and their absolutely fabulous people and stuff.*

[HOW MANY PEOPLE WOULD BE IN THAT GROUP?]

Well I don't know. There would probably be a couple, a few groups, but they make up the elite.

[WHY ARE THEY THE ELITE?]

Because they all bitch about each other.

They think they are, it is what they do, they do cool things.

I suppose we accept it, that they are the popular group. But I don't know why.

I don't think they are any more special than the rest of us. I do that as well, I call them the popular group. I just see them that way.

Because it is the biggest, obviously they have lots of friends and everything. They are the ones that have real big parties and stuff.

[SO IS THERE PRESTIGE IN THE BIGGER THE GROUP IS? OR DOES IT JUST HAPPEN TO BE WITH THIS GROUP?]

I don't know. The bigger the group the more people are in there, obviously. No, because there are more people, that means they have got more friends, not necessarily within the group. You can't like everyone, so they don't necessarily have more friends but if you have more friends you are more popular.

[DO YOU THINK THAT THEY SEE THEMSELVES AS THE ELITE GROUP?]
Yeah.

They have got so much ... like.

Like for example if someone is having a big party and everything, the whole group is naturally invited. No invitations are handed out. Anyone who is not in the big group, well it is supposed to be like an open house party, but no one who is not in the big group doesn't go because they feel

they have to be personally invited by that person. I mean, when these big parties are being held, people say come along, but they haven't said that to other people in my group so I didn't go because I didn't feel.

The group also knows what is going on with everyone else. It is like a big communications network. All the gossip comes from that group.

[JUST WITHIN THAT GROUP OR TO EVERYBODY?]

No everyone finds out about it. They usually have the loudest voices.

The canteen group can be seen as a central point, both physically and in terms of some sort of trend setting for many of the Grade 10 students interviewed. Around the periphery and with different attitudes towards, and relationships with, this central group were many smaller, closer knit and more focused groups. Some of those who were part of the other, smaller groups moved in and out of the larger canteen group. Others did not see such a fluid situation either for themselves or from the perspective of the canteen group, as indicated in the following comments:

Members of the main group, if they came with us they would not be accepted back into their group fairly well. I don't believe. Like one of our members could go to another group and come back and they would still be accepted back.

Trying to be more precise about the nature of the canteen group's influence was difficult. In discussions about the group, informants often resorted to other ill-defined vernacular expressions like *'cool'* and *'the mainstream'*. In simple terms, *"the mainstream's like the average kid who goes to parties, has friends, goes out on weekends - that's what they do - the main body of students"*. In a similar vein, the following discussion picks up on some consequences of not being 'like the average kid".

The way kids are at school, any school, they can really give people crap or put them down - for anything. Keeping within the 'main' is pretty important - everything you do. They just don't let go if you do something wrong. They just keep it up and up. Everyone's got a pretty good idea of what the 'main' is and what ... With guys, it's a lot like, if things are 'gay' - you just don't do it coz you get crap for it. There's a huge hate for homosexuals amongst guys.

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Another perspective on the 'mainstream' comes from talk about what it is not as in the following description of a student who was described as a loner:

> *{....} is a loner because she really wants to do well at school. She always comes top of the class and she is not into any drugs or anything, she is not into any boys and she speaks quite properly which I think is quite beautiful. Like she is very quiet and you just never hear from her and she is always just on the oval maybe reading a book or something. I guess she doesn't fit the mainstream at all really.*

'Cool' and 'mainstream' were acknowledged by one student as having different meanings in different contexts and for different people. So, for example:

> *Cool is, ... In Margaret River [a small coastal resort town in Western Australia] cool is very laid back and real and Oka. Cool is to be totally mainstream and to be totally in with all fashion and all passing crazes and be first to wear jelly shoes and everything like that. Cool is very kind of I don't know, my opinion of cool is different to other people's opinions I guess.*

Just as 'cool' has different meanings for different people, so too do many aspects of this study. While some very clear messages have been coming through the data on the importance of peer groups to these Grade 10 students, the data on more specific aspects of peer groups and their influence on adolescent students is not so conclusive. This discussion on preliminary findings started off by suggesting that in analysing the data gathered so far, things often were not as they seemed on simple interpretation of the text. Just as the data on the nature of peer influence was presenting itself in a number of layers, so to has data on many other aspects of this study.

Theoretical frameworks

Cognisant of a body of research that points to the critical importance of psychosocial variables, we commenced the current study with open minds, preferring to examine patterns in the data as students revealed the social realities of their group life in and out of school. In seeking to account for the emerging patterns, we subsequently made reference to the literature and to a number of theories that might account for the sorts of things the students were revealing about themselves, individually and collectively. We then tested these emic insights, combined with our own etic perspectives, against the explanatory power of a number of theories including Social Theories, Psychological Theories, and Lifestyle Theories. While none of these theories could singularly account

for the wide variation we were finding in our data, congruence with Peer Cluster Theory, derived in turn from Psychosocial and Lifestyle Theories, has been the most evident to date (Oetting and Beauvais, (1986). This psychosocial framework which has been evolved in order to explain the phenomenon of peer influence, is thus particularly germane to our current work. It incorporates those psychosocial factors that are deemed to promote resistive behaviours or to 'inoculate' youth against drug use and identifies socialisation links which could have causal influences on drug use by means of path analysis. In applying the theory to a study which surveyed 415 eleventh and twelfth grade students, the results obtained showed a correlation between drug use and peer influence that accounted for more than half of the variance (Oetting and Beauvais, 1987).

Another theoretical framework, which has and continues to be of relevance to our work, is an extension of Social Learning Theory as advocated by one of its most authoritative advocates, namely, Albert Bandura (1977, 1990) and re labelled social cognitive theory by him. Its basic tenets are that behaviour is a function of the subjective value of an outcome, and of the subjective probability (expectation) that a particular action will achieve that outcome.

Peer Cluster Theory, therefore, allied with Bandura's work, provides a valuable and important framework within which to measure the influence of the peer group. There are, however, questions which still need to be addressed, such as, "What are the structures and dynamics of the peer group that attract membership and loyalty?". "Do adolescents belong to more than one peer group, and if so in what respects do these groups differ?" "Within the groups, which members are the most influential?" Is it possible to develop a typology encapsulating the leadership style within the peer group, or does leadership naturally rotate around the group in specific situations?"

While innumerable texts have been written about adolescence, and a range of interventions developed targeting youth deemed to be 'at-risk', not much of the research employs adolescent frames, values-sets and language to capture the dynamics of the peer group and peer group leadership 'from the ground up'. We assert that adolescent frames, values-sets and language are needed in order to gain access to the adolescent subculture and from this perspective to reveal the world viewed within the social realities that adolescents confront on a daily basis.

For the Future

Stage One of this study has now concluded and selected aspects of large data set, summarised in Appendix 1, have been discussed and presented above. The case study school in which the Grade 10 cohort of students were studied, while allowing for valuable insights on the operation of peer leadership and influence, provides a somewhat restricted range of opportunities in its setting, in seeking to describe and account for an anticipated wide range of peer group dynamics. A large data set, that illuminates student group life both in and out of school, has evolved from this work. The particular ethos of the case study school circumscribes other possibilities that are likely to exist elsewhere and the study has now been widened, in Stage Two, to include two state sector metropolitan senior high schools and one rural Catholic secondary school. These have been selected to cover a wide range of Socio-economic Status (SES), ethnicity and pervasive religious values within the school communities in both rural and urban settings. Grade 10 students will continue be our primary, but not exclusive, focus for data collection from which we anticipate a more extensive range of both typical (as captured in our current data sets) and atypical dynamics will emerge, and which need to be accounted for in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the reciprocal relationships that occur between the peer group, peer leadership and influence.

An embryonic typology of adolescent peer group leadership, not reported here, is beginning to emerge, and is a prefigured focus for continuing work in Stage Two. It is hoped to extend this typology and capture it in terms of a number of vignettes which characterise each style. Interpretive validity will be sought by further reference to different school communities in order to identify adolescent others who match the various characterisations that emerge using consensus methods.

Theoretical outcomes from this research are expected to allow for the further validation of our prior research endeavours in this area - albeit from a very different perspective. While a lot of work remains to be done in this area, a more complete understanding of adolescent peer leadership and peer group influences, as this pertains to risk taking and lifestyle choice has policy implications for health educators and counsellors.

Practical benefits should also accrue in the areas of health and personal development curricula and pastoral care in schools. Once the dynamics of the adolescent peer groups are more completely understood from an adolescent perspective, and leadership styles comprehensively documented, these phenomena can be incorporated into health education programs and interventions on behalf of youth to target more effectively the promotion of behaviours that enhance healthy lifestyle choice. This understanding can

also be used to ameliorate the effects of negative risk-taking behaviours within the adolescent peer group in school settings.

Findings should also be of benefit to supervisors and teacher educators concerned with the preparation and induction of teachers especially in health and sexuality education. They are likely to be relevant to the education of adolescents and at least have implications for the teaching and learning of children at the pre-pubescent stage of their development.

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Appendix 1

A Taxonomy of Nodes Indexed Using NUD.IST for Data Analysis

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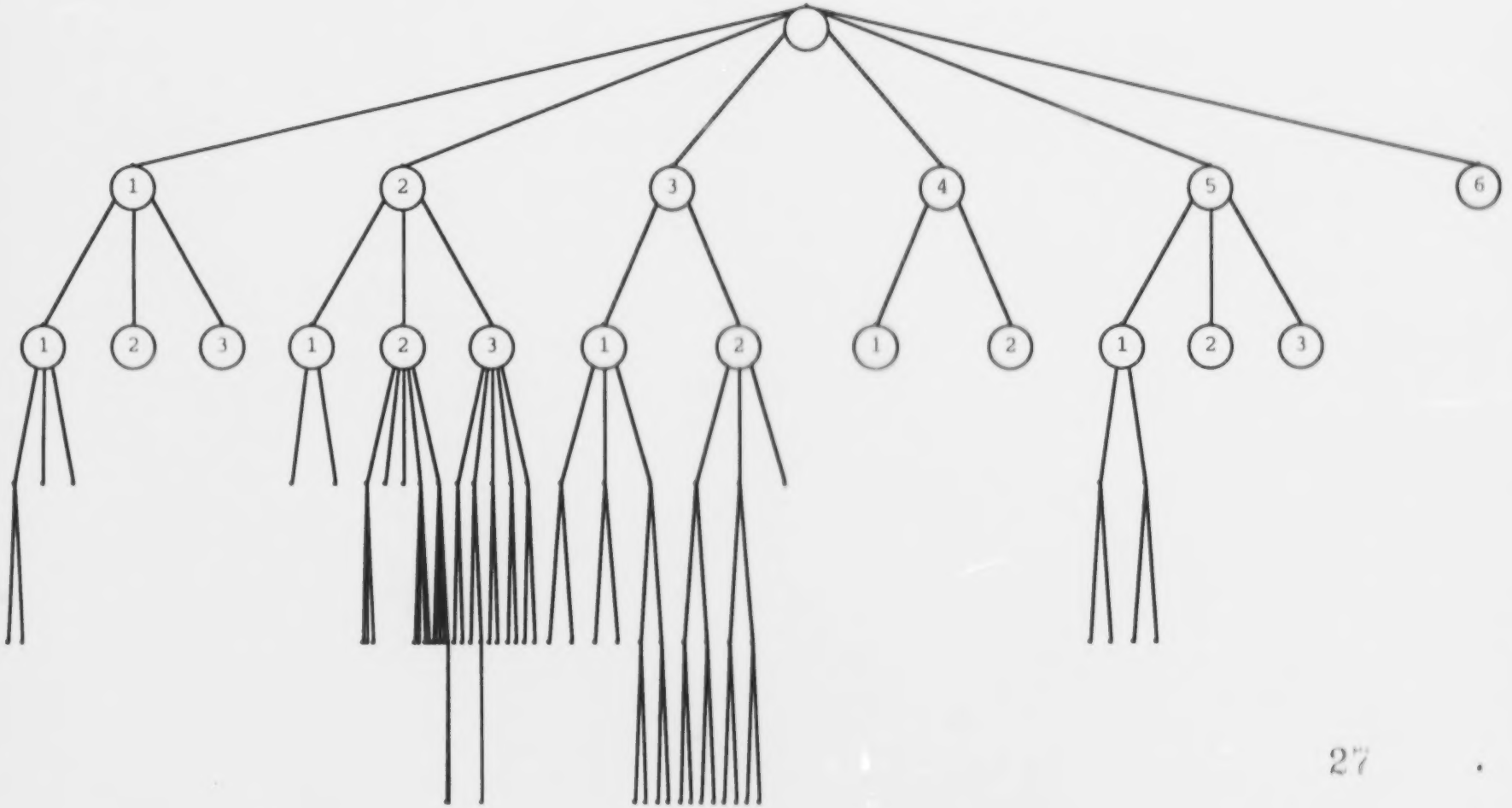
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A Taxonomy of Nodes Indexed using NUD.IST™ for Data Analysis

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(1 3)	/CONTEXT/community
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